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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 000567

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DELIVERS MESSAGE OF CONCERN TO TIGRAY
OFFICIALS

REF: A. ADDIS 257 AND 258
[1](#)B. 2008 ADDIS 1592

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) In a February 26-27 visit to Mekele, the Ambassador met with Central Committee members from the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF, the core party within the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) Coalition) to highlight U.S. concerns about Ethiopia's narrowing political space. At the same time, Ambassador reiterated Ethiopia's importance to the U.S. and assured continuation of a close partnership. Central Committee members, including Tigray Regional President Tsegaye Berhe and the Tigray Region's TPLF office head Tewodros Hagos, stressed that the ruling party is committed to the democratization of Ethiopia and rural development and encouraged the U.S. to be supportive in these efforts. While Tewodros insisted that the EPRDF is more than willing to dialogue with opposition parties, he re-iterated an oft-heard complaint from Addis-based ruling party officials that opposition parties have a tendency to instigate violence and have not requested talks, thereby reinforcing their belief that the opposition is not committed to participating in the democratic process. TPLF representatives were apprehensive about the Ambassador's meeting with opposition party Arena Tigray, first encouraging us to change the location of our meeting and later inquiring how the meeting went and what points the opposition raised. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) The Ambassador, USAID Mission Director, and PolOffs met with Tsegaye Berhe, President of Tigray Regional State, and Tewodros Hagos, Tigray Region TPLF office head, in separate meetings, and also hosted a dinner for TPLF Central Committee members. The delegation also visited a USAID-sponsored dairy development project, a newly-opened garment factory, and a CDC-funded regional laboratory.

Ethiopia Remains a Key Partner to U.S.

[1](#)3. (SBU) The Ambassador communicated that, despite Ethiopia's recent concerns, Ethiopia remains an important partner for the U.S. and the U.S. expects to continue to have robust private dialogue with Ethiopia in the coming years. He said that the talks should focus on stability (including political and economic reform), opening of political space, and initiating dialogue between the ruling and opposition parties. The Ambassador stated that the basis of stability

is democratic values, commended Ethiopia on the campaign season leading to the 2005 elections, and expressed hope that the 2010 elections would again see open political competition. Finally, he encouraged Ethiopia to become a model for other countries in the region by espousing multi-party democracy and taking measures to promote economic reform. Pol/Econ Counselor recounted the concerns raised by Acting A/S for Africa Phil Carter to Addis-based ruling party officials during his January visit (Ref. A) i.e. the need to broaden the scope of dialogue to balance security, development, and political issues.

14. (SBU) Tsegaye Berhe expressed his view that Ethiopia's partnership with the U.S. is mutually beneficial, and he seemed confident that the U.S. will continue to value the security cooperation relationship. He then stressed that the Ethiopian government, under the ruling EPRDF, is committed to developing Ethiopia and is struggling to establish genuine democracy. (NOTE: He said that because Ethiopia is "backwards" and has a traditionalist culture, the process of democratization is very difficult. Tewodros Hagos also said that their interpretation of democracy may well be different than ours. End Note.) Tsegaye assured us that we should not worry if there are "ups and downs" because the government is working to be transparent and accountable and it is not against democratic processes. Reiterating a point made by Prime Minister Meles to the press on February 20, he concluded by saying that friends (i.e. the U.S.) should support Ethiopia instead of pushing it aside, and be part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

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15. (SBU) Tewodros stressed that Ethiopia's main security threat is poverty and lack of development, and its primary focus is on creating partnerships to achieve development. He said that the democratization process is also important, and that in this regard Ethiopia is on the "right track." He noted that in the 2005 elections several political parties competed in Tigray, including the multi-ethnic party Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD). He admitted that the ruling party had made many mistakes but they are learning and correcting themselves all the time.

Political Space for 2010 Elections

16. (SBU) Tewodros seemed confident that the TPLF has the support of the majority of the region's population and will win the 2010 elections. The party currently has 450,000 members in Tigray (against a regional population of 4.5 million). Tewodros argued that for TPLF members, political power is not an individual benefit; they see it as a commitment to contribute to the development of this country. He cited an example where Tigrayan peasants set an example for others by working almost double the amount of time they usually work in order to accomplish their target. When asked about Arena Tigray, the first Tigrayan opposition party, Tsegaye said that opposition parties are free to campaign but they try to get recognized by breaking the law. (NOTE: Arena Tigray reported that the TPLF was responsible for delaying their party registration, blocking media access, and harassing party officials and members. END NOTE.) Tewodros Hagos said that the EPRDF is willing to dialogue with any political party as long as they respect the constitution of the country, and that there are common issues among parties they should work together to resolve. However, he added that opposition parties have a tendency to instigate violence (citing the post-2005 election disturbances) and none have requested to dialogue with the EPRDF to date, proving to him that they are not really committed to promoting the democratic process. Tewodros assured us that the TPLF is committed to conducting the 2010 election in a free, fair, and transparent manner.

¶7. (SBU) Several TPLF representatives were apprehensive about the Ambassador's meeting with opposition party Arena Tigray. After our morning meeting with Tsegaye Berhe, the TPLF Protocol Officer encouraged us not to meet with Arena Tigray at their office that afternoon, but instead at a quiet hotel or other less-public location. During the dinner with the TPLF Central Committee, three separate Committee members asked about how the meeting with Arena Tigray went and what points the opposition raised.

On the CSO Law

¶8. (SBU) USAID Mission Director asked about the implementation of the Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSO law) that was recently passed. Tsegaye Berhe replied that foreigners should not intervene in political affairs, but stressed that Ethiopia encourages foreign help in supporting the democratic process and social and economic development. He added that the government will implement the law and, if unintended consequences arise, they will react accordingly. USAID Director also raised concerns about the Ministry of Justice suspending registration of any new civil society organizations (CSOs). Tewodros Hagos replied that the intention of the government is not to block CSOs from registering, but instead the delays are due to institutional weaknesses and a lack of coordination between government agencies.

Frequent Droughts Due Partly to Water Mismanagement

¶9. (SBU) The Ambassador emphasized our continued commitment to the development of the Tigray region, but noted that the current food assistance program is not sustainable. He noted that we are looking for ways to increase agricultural productivity. Tsegaye Berhe said that the frequent droughts the region experiences are largely a problem of water mismanagement, and not entirely lack of rain. Two woredas,

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Raya Azebo and Alemata, are experiencing the most severe drought, and if the Belg rains continue badly it could cause major problems for feeding cattle. He argued that the Meher harvest increased 7-8% last year, especially in the central and western zones. Tsegaye noted that enough food is produced to feed the region, but people in eastern Tigray cannot afford to buy the food produced in western Tigray.

Eritrea on the Brink of Disaster

¶10. (SBU) Tsegaye Berhe reported that the situation within Eritrea is worsening, with rumors of Eritrean refugees and soldiers crossing into Ethiopia day and night. Soldiers are reportedly shooting their own people at the border to prevent them from fleeing. He also recounted rumors that the army is disintegrating and President Isaias Afewerki is losing control.

Comment

¶11. (C) The Ambassador's visit reassured TPLF Central Committee members that, under the new Administration, Ethiopia will remain an important partner for the U.S. At the same time, he stressed that the U.S. is concerned about Ethiopia's narrowing political space and the stability implications that such narrowing may have. Despite TPLF rhetoric of promoting democratic processes, our conversation with the opposition indicated otherwise. The visit made clear that the TPLF remains committed to the idea of

"revolutionary democracy," whereby the ruling party determines how best to establish democracy in Ethiopia and retains a tight grip on power. TPLF interlocutors were clear in their message that they appreciate U.S. support and assistance, but that U.S. input into how Ethiopia should achieve its "revolutionary democracy" and development objectives is not welcome. At the same time, Ambassador delivered Acting A/S Carter's strong message of U.S. concern to the core of the ruling party's politbureau. End Comment.
YAMAMOTO